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***Opera, Nationalism, and Class Conflict in Contemporary Spain: Reactions to the Burning of Barcelona's Liceu***  
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# OPERA, NATIONALISM, AND CLASS CONFLICT IN CONTEMPORARY SPAIN: REACTIONS TO THE BURNING OF BARCELONA'S LICEU\*

STANLEY BRANDES

## INTRODUCTION

On January 31, 1994, at 10:45 in the morning, the Gran Teatre del Liceu in Barcelona began to burn. During a simple soldering job near the left front stage, the vast curtain caught fire. Subsequent inquiry determined that the fire was caused by negligence; the usual precautions had been ignored. Less than three hours later, as all of Spain could observe by television, the imposing edifice had burnt to the ground. The Liceu was one of the oldest, most elegant, and most venerated opera houses in all of Europe, on a par with La Scala in Milan and Covent Garden in London. Moreover, it was the only structure in Spain dedicated specifically to opera as a musical form. The Liceu was a large opera house; it consisted of an orchestra section and five horseshoe-shaped tiers, the first of which contained boxes. The theater held 3,500 spectators, more than any opera house except the Metropolitan in New York. Within the confines of the Liceu was housed the Cercle del Liceu, a private men's club, with one of the most valuable and extensive collections of Catalan modernist paintings in existence, among which were a dozen large canvasses by Ramon Casas. Miraculously –or, according to one's point of view, suspiciously– the entire collection of 84 oils and 33 decorative art objects were evacuated in time to be saved.

This was the third time that the Liceu's existence was threatened. As an institution, the Liceu was founded in Barcelona in 1837. Initially, an abandoned convent was used for performances. The first Liceu Opera House, completed on April 4, 1847, was almost totally destroyed by fire in 1861 (McDonogh 189). It was reconstructed and redecorated within a year's time, however. As McDonogh has stated, the rapidity of this refinancing and rebuilding "manifests the

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importance that opera had assumed within the social life of the city" by the mid-nineteenth century (190). On November 4, 1893, the Liceu was the object of an anarchist attack. During a performance of Rossini's "William Tell," an activist named Santiago Salvador Franch tossed two bombs down onto the orchestra section from high above. One of the bombs exploded, resulting in twenty fatalities.

The Liceu was by no means a random target. It had become inextricably associated with the industrial ruling class and affluent bourgeoisie, the most important members of which owned boxes at the opera house as inheritable property. The Liceu was located along the Rambles—at that time the most fashionable sector of the city—and, in McDonogh's words, "was a meeting ground for the cohesion of the elite as a group" (197). The anarchist attack so affected the Catalan elite, claims turn-of-the-century choronicler Joaquim Nadal that, for decades thereafter, it cast a dark shadow on the theater; "a group of orchestra seats remained deserted...as a silent memorial to that enormous catastrophe" and people "involuntarily raised their eyes to the roof as if they feared to discover the same criminal act from another hand..." (qtd. in McDonogh 200).

McDonogh's *Good Families* (188–200) provides a superb analysis of the Liceu Opera House in the nineteenth-century as an arena within which class structure and conflict were symbolized and acted out. In this paper, through an analysis of reactions to the 1994 fire, I hope to extend his story into the present. Within Catalonia and throughout all of Spain, the burning of the Liceu gave vent to feelings not only of class conflict but also nationalistic fervor. By examining how Catalans and people from all over Spain reacted to the event, we obtain a vision of the texture of contemporary Spanish social life. We can also gauge the contour and forcefulness of political alliances and rivalries as well as of allegiances to state and ethnic group.

McDonogh has convincingly shown, mainly through ethno-historical research, the anthropological dimensions of elite cultural institutions in Spain, like the Liceu. In this paper I aim to build on his methodological message. I wish to illustrate how an ostensibly minute event in the course of world history, like the burning of the Liceu, can be transformed into a political lightening rod around which strong feelings coalesce. Moreover, I want to demonstrate that the analysis of politics and elite culture provides a fertile approach to a social anthropology of nation states like those of present-day southern Europe.

A note regarding language is in order. The opera house treated here is known throughout most of the western world as the Liceo, a Spanish rendering. The full name of the building in Spanish is the Gran Teatro del Liceo. In this paper, whenever speaking in my own voice, I



shall use the standard Catalan term by which the institution is known throughout Catalonia, that is, the Gran Teatre del Liceu—for short, the Liceu. When quoting others, I shall use the term that they used, whether Liceo or Liceu, in reference to this opera house. However, as indicated below, use of one or the other term conveys an intrinsic political meaning, a possible alliance with pro or anti-Catalan forces, which forms an important component of reactions to the fire of January 31, 1994.

## REGION AND NATION

One of the great themes throughout Spanish history—a theme made world famous through Ortega y Gasset's lengthy essay, *España invertebrada* (1948)—has been the tension between centralism and regional autonomy. Catalonia, Galicia, the Basque Country, Andalusia, Asturias, and many other geographic units within Spain have long maintained separate cultural identities. In terms of political relations to one another, and especially their connection to the centuries-old political center, Castile, they have been almost continually rivalrous and occasionally acrimonious and rebellious.

Of all regions in the Iberian Peninsula, Catalonia, with its great port of Barcelona as political, economic, and cultural capital, has throughout its lengthy history earned among the most rebellious and independent profiles. Since the early Middle Ages, when Romance languages began to assume their current form, the people of Catalonia have spoken a separate tongue from other peoples in the Iberian Peninsula. They also have experienced a distinctive, if not separate, history from the rest of Spain. During the high Middle Ages, Catalonia was the only part of Spain to experience a true feudal regime. This regime was radically transformed in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries by the capitalist, industrial revolution, just as occurred at the same time in places like England, France, and northern Italy. In fact, Catalonia was the first part of Spain to industrialize (Pi-Sunyer; Schneider, Schneider, and Hansen), which accounts in large part for its enduring economic strength. During the mid-nineteenth century, when the Liceu was founded, Catalonia boasted a well-entrenched, powerful, and highly affluent bourgeoisie, concentrated in Barcelona. By the turn of the twentieth century, thousands of immigrants from southern and eastern Spain—a much poorer, less literate, and more downtrodden Spain than Catalonia—had poured into Barcelona and throughout Catalonia to work in factories and the service sector, both of which had burgeoned as a consequence of extensive industrial development (see, e.g., Esteva Fabregat; Luzán).

This is the period when Catalonia became rich and economically powerful, hence a target of envy throughout the rest of the country.

Catalans from that time to the present have suffered from invidious stereotyping. They are said to be the "Jews" of Spain, not literally, but rather in the sense of being selfish, rich, and stingy, as Jews are popularly thought to be throughout most of Europe. Any anthropological fieldworker who has worked among non-Catalan peoples in the Iberian Peninsula will attest to this reputation. "Catalans will never offer to buy you a drink," many people will tell you; "In Catalonia, everyone pays on his own." Jokes, too, highlight this alleged trait, even jokes that Catalans tell about themselves (Brandes 33). Manuel Vázquez Montalbán states what he calls the "conventional wisdom" this way: "the Catalans are self-centered, economically selfish, and very much into money, while people from Madrid are do-nothings who live at the expense of work carried out by the rest of the country's citizens" (209). When in 1939 Franco became dictator, he applied repressive means to suppress all expressions of separate regional identity. All regions, but particularly Catalonia and the Basque Country, with separate tongues and a long history of tense relations with the political center in Castile, fell victim to his centralist policies. Catalans bitterly recall efforts to wipe out their language and other expressions of ethnic identity, like the *sardana*, the Catalan national dance (Benet 386; Brandes 34).

During nearly half a century of dictatorship, Catalonia thus experienced an unusual fate: economic preeminence, high rates of literacy and world-class achievement in business and the fine arts, all combined with political and cultural oppression emanating from the central state regime. Among Catalonia's most prominent institutions was its opera house, the Gran Teatre del Liceu, which spawned, nourished and attracted great operatic personalities. Its best-known native stars in the present era are Victoria de los Ángeles (Victòria dels Àngels), José (Josep) Carreras, Jaume Aragall, and Montserrat Caballé, all of them Catalan by birth, culture, and identity. In fact, on January 31, 1994, as smoke still emanated from the burning embers of the building, television viewers could watch the physically imposing Montserrat Caballé stumble among the ruins in high heels, tears streaming from her face. A few days later, her emotions now under control, she gave a television concert at the same spot.

To add to the histrionics, on February 5, Caballé and her rival, soprano Victoria de los Angeles, walked simultaneously along the rubble that was once a great and elegant theater. They ignored one another, thus bypassing this opportunity to break the feud that they had maintained for years. When journalists pointed out to Victoria de los Ángeles that Montserrat Caballé at that very moment occupied the



ruins of what used to be the Cercle del Liceu, she replied disdainfully, "That doesn't interest me at all; that part makes me laugh, while the other (the fire) makes me cry" (*El Mundo* 5 Feb. 1995). Even in its destroyed state, the Liceu continued to operate as a stage set against which operatic divas could publicly display their disputes. (The ruins, in fact, became a tourist attraction; on March 9, it was announced (*La Vanguardia*) that, as of Saint George's Day, April 23, the day of Catalonia's patron saint, they would be open to the public.) However, the dispute among ethnic and regional entities that followed upon the destruction of the Liceu was substantially more acute and consequential than that among the divas.

### THE INITIAL STATE RESPONSE

Initially, the most salient impression was that representatives of the central state supported rapid reconstruction. The reaction was immediate. The same day of the fire, the Minister of Culture, Carmen Alborch, arrived on the scene. One day later, on February 1, Queen Sofía and her daughter, the Infanta Cristina, rushed from Madrid to Barcelona to examine the ruins. (Queen Sofía sported a hard hat, which conveyed that she was willing to risk physical danger to demonstrate solidarity.) She was quoted in the Barcelona newspaper, *La Vanguardia* (2 Feb. 1994), as saying, "Knowing the Catalans, I am sure that the Liceo will be reborn from its ashes." Behind this remark, as all Spaniards could tell, was the popular image of the Catalans as shrewd, well-organized and entrepreneurial. The report went on to state that "The Queen assured the director of the theater of her willingness to attend the inaugural gala event of the new Liceu."

Newspaper reports left little doubt that the Liceu would be rebuilt quickly and at public expense. On February 1, *ABC*, one of Madrid's most widely read and longest-running newspapers devoted its entire front page to a picture of the Liceu in flames. The caption read, in part, "The Liceo theater is the pride of Spanish culture. Not only the city of Barcelona and the Generalitat (the Autonomous Government of Catalonia) but also the national government should contribute towards its restoration." For the editors of *La Vanguardia* (1 Feb. 1994), "The Liceo was until yesterday one of the most emblematic symbols of Catalan society..." *La Vanguardia* immediately embraced the idea that the theater would be rebuilt, but cautioned that there should be time for reflection before final decisions were made as to its location and design. *El Periódico* (1 Feb. 1994), another Barcelona paper, carried an enormous front-page headline the day after the fire: "THE LICEO WILL BE REBORN FROM ITS ASHES."

Within the first few days, newspapers reported a national debate that had already begun on the type of theater the new Liceu would be—whether modern, a precise replica of the original, or something in between—as well as where it would be located—along the Rambles as before, or at some alternate site. A preeminent Catalan architect was quoted as saying (*La Vanguardia* 3 Feb. 1994), “A Liceu must be made that is based in history but with today’s mentality.” Already by February 2, predictions were being made as to the cost and duration that the reconstruction would entail. *El Periódico* (2 Feb. 1994) announced in a bold headline that “The Liceo needs 400 million pesetas and three years to be rebuilt.” In the same issue, Carmen Alborch, the Spanish Minister of Culture, was quoted as saying that, “Without making any promises, I estimate that the Liceo can be finished in 1996.”

#### ETHNONATIONALISTIC RIVALRY

The issue of rebuilding the opera house at public expense and the fervor with which representatives of the central state came to the Liceu’s defense gave rise to expressions of regional and ethnic rivalry. It was immediately pointed out in Seville (*El País* 2 Feb. 1994) that the Pavillion of Discoveries, built for the World Exposition of 1992 but destroyed by fire prior to its actual inauguration, was never reconstructed; “it continues in ruins two years after the fire,” declared one headline (*ibid.*).

On February 14 in the Andalusian edition of the national newspaper, *Diario 16*, a reader from the city of Écija in the province of Seville, wrote a particularly caustic letter to the Editor. The newspaper placed its curious title in boldface type, “A propósito del Nou Liceu”—“Regarding the New Liceu”—with the first two words being rendered in Spanish and the last two in Catalan:

I am a human being, an earthly being, European, and Spanish and have had the good fortune to be born in Andalusia, more specifically Seville, and I’ve always been amused by the behavior of our Catalan brothers, who now want Spaniards, who are to many of them (i.e., Catalans) foreigners, to pay for the reconstruction of a symbol of the Catalan bourgeoisie, (which is) laughable.

I am from Écija (Sevilla), which they call “the city of towers” for the great number of them found in its confines, or used to be, because a number of them—just as a number of other monuments and buildings throughout Spain—have fallen down, due to the deterioration that they have suffered because of the negligence of various (governmental) administrations.

I believe that there are hundreds of affairs, such as poverty, that devastate our country: health, education, drugs..., upon which to spend nine million Spanish pesetas prior to losing them in the reconstruction of a private edifice



such as is the Liceo of Barcelona. At the very least, may they write the name in the Christian language (que le pongan el nombre en cristiano).

The final remark refers to widespread use in Catalonia of the Catalan word, *Liceu*, rather than the Spanish, *Liceo*.

With this remark, the writer from Écija raised the most sensitive issue that one can raise with Catalans, that of language. Catalan people bitterly recall speaking their native tongue on the streets or in stores of Barcelona, and having Castilian speakers reprimand them by demanding that they speak "*cristiano*"—a word which in colloquial Spanish means the Spanish language, that is, the language worthy of Christians. Occasionally such demands still occur, as in the remark from the reader from Écija; however, the incidence and impact of such insults were considerably worse during the Franco regime, when they received official sanction.

The reader's remark is even more hurtful considering that in Spanish the word "*cristiano*" is often used colloquially in Spanish to mean human being. By stating, "may they write the name in cristiano," the reader from Écija invokes what is to the Catalans the most hated insult: that their millenium-old language is unworthy of being spoken, not only by Christians but also by humans, and that it should be wiped out. For Catalans, for whom the most important component of their identity is their language (Azevedo; Badia i Margarit; Vallverdú; Woolard), linguistic obliteration means obliteration as a people. As Oriol and Mary Jane Pi-Sunyer have pointed out, Catalans have long been plagued by "political subordination and fear of culture loss" (291), a loss that would be definitive with the disappearance of the Catalan language.

The popular antipathy towards the Catalan language that emerged in the debate over the Liceu shows that, outside Catalonia, Spaniards used the issue of governmental support for the opera house to demonstrate a more long-term source of hatred: linguistic, hence ethnic, diversity. On February 4, it was reported (*La Vanguardia*) that the president of the Autonomous Community of Castilla and León, Juan José Lucas, protested vociferously that the Liceu should receive financial aid; two great monuments under his jurisdiction—the aqueduct and the cathedral of Segovia, both in need of renovation—had been offered no support. The Secretary General of the the Popular Party, the most powerful right-of-center party in Spain, added caustically, "Pujol (Jordi Pujol, President of the Generalitat, the Autonomous Government of Catalonia) only talks in Spanish to ask for money." Again, the stereotype of the money-grubbing, foreign-speaking Catalan emerged in the debate over Liceu funding.

One Andalusian (*Diario* 16 Feb. 1994) underscored the linguistic



issue by stating, "If the State (that is, the central government of Spain) contributes to the restoration of the Liceu, the State has the right to give it the title, ...Liceo Nacional de España" —that is, The National Liceo of Spain. Such a title would, of course, deprive the institution of its Catalan identity, thereby abetting the destruction of Catalan culture and identity. The Liceu, in fact, has always been regarded, at least in Catalonia, as essentially Catalan. When the modern and commodious Maestranza Theater in Seville offered to house what remained of the Liceu's operatic season after the fire (*El Periódico* 12 Feb. 1994), the offer was rejected.

The governing Consortium of the Liceu, a committee representing the private boxholders and city and regional governmental agencies, opted instead in favor of several chamber opera productions held in a flamboyant art deco theater, the Palau de la Música Catalana (Palace of Catalan Music), located just a short walk up the Rambles from the Liceu. The opera was to retain its Catalan associations, even at the expense of the 1994 season.

It was to Catalans inconceivable that the Liceu, thoroughly identified with Catalonia and the city of Barcelona as it always had been, should be relocated outside Catalonia. Indeed, immediately after the fire, *El Mundo* (1 Feb. 1994), a Madrid newspaper, referred to the Liceu in a bold headline as "the temple of Catalan culture." This intriguing rubric was reiterated repeatedly in written and spoken accounts of the fire.

#### SACRED STRUCTURES AND THE LICEU

The religious metaphor inscribed in the use of the word "temple" is one that pervades popular discourse on the Liceu. The main editorial in *La Vanguardia* of February 1, 1994, refers to the destruction of the Liceu as "an important loss for the material patrimony of the city, but also for its *spiritual* and cultural patrimony..." (italics added). The newspaper *ABC* (1 Feb. 1994) provided perhaps the most elaborate religious analogy: "When a great theater burns, a huge collapse of theater in its totality is produced. It has the same significance as the destruction of a temple, a cathedral, in which many non-material items are destroyed: enthusiasm, beliefs, spiritual retreat. The soul of theater is made present; we know it (the soul) all the better when any theater is damaged or destroyed. The loss of its body hurts for having been so full of soul. The Liceo of Barcelona was/is the artistic soul and emblem of the city which has enabled it to thrive during so many years." Columnist José Aguilar (*ABC* 1 Feb. 1994) called the Liceu "a temple of contemporary culture." A letter to *El País* (1 Feb. 1994) proclaimed

with triumphant optimism that the Liceu, like the "temple of Solomon," will be rebuilt.

The explicit likeness in the press of the Liceu to a temple or cathedral, even in the Castilian press, must have exacerbated anti-Catalan feelings. The public debate soon turned to historical-cultural monuments in other parts of the country, principally religious edifices, which were not receiving the same attention from the Spanish government as was the Liceu. For example, one citizen (*Diario 16* 10 Feb. 1994), protested that the cathedral of Seville, "the largest cathedral in Spain...is dying little by little of crumbling stone." And why?, asks that individual (*ibid.*): "Because the Liceo is in Barcelona and the largest cathedral in Spain is in Seville." Seville, of course, is the capital of Andalusia, traditionally among the poorest regions of Spain with one of the highest illiteracy rates. It also has exported large numbers of workers to Catalonia's industrial cities. Sevillians have long felt economically deprived relative to the Catalans. (One would think, however, that Catalans, in turn, had reason to feel that after the World Exposition of 1992 in Seville, enough governmental money had been invested in that city to squelch any feelings of envy on the part of the Andalusians.)

But it was not the cathedral of Seville, but rather the spectacular medieval cathedral of Burgos, located in an Old Castilian city north of Madrid, that became a *cause célèbre* overnight. A week after the fire, a reader commented in *El País* (8 Feb. 1994):

Is Catalonia not Spain? Or is it that Spain is Catalonia? What a shock has jolted the establishment in face of the fact that the Liceo has burned!...Without the flames even having been put out, all governmental officials have gathered round.

But, of all things, some days prior to the event we had to hear the Minister of Culture say that there were no funds available to attend to the great deterioration and danger facing the cathedral of Burgos. Isn't that (building) part of the world's heritage?

And yesterday the vicepresident of the government (Narcís Serra, a Catalan), together with the Minister of Culture, told us that reconstruction work on the new Liceo would begin right away, that it would take a year and a half for the Liceo to begin functioning again. Pujol, speaking in Castilian, a language which he by no means uses with frequency, tells us that the reconstruction will occur with help from the central government. Am I right to ask whether Spain is Catalonia?

This letter, emanating from Madrid, frames the financial question exactly as it appeared most widely: as an issue of ethnic rivalry. The letter poses the problem of the identity of Catalonia as part of Spain. In its offhanded but nonetheless pointed reference to Pujol's testimony, it raises the everpresent theme of linguistic diversity. The



campaign in favor of funds for the cathedral of Burgos carried the heavy weight of longstanding resentment against Catalonia and the Catalans.

Within weeks after the fire, the cathedral of Burgos was on everyone's mind. It was the source of heated conversation and endless journalistic commentary. A massive publicity campaign in favor of the cathedral was launched and achieved rapid success. On April 9, 1994, the Orchestra of the Gran Teatre del Liceu, to demonstrate its magnanimity, gave a benefit performance in the cathedral itself to benefit restoration. Political luminaries who were prominent in the debate over the restoration of monuments attended the event; these public figures included Jordi Pujol, President of the Generalitat; Juan José Lucas, President of the Autonomous Government of Castilla-León; and Carmen Alborch, Minister of Culture. Pujol was quoted as lamenting that the concert was occasioned by unfortunate circumstances. Significantly, he concluded his public remarks with one of the most frequently-heard Castilian proverbs: "No hay mal que por bien no venga"—"There's nothing bad that doesn't result in good" (*El País* 10 Apr. 1994), which is roughly equivalent to the American saying, "Every cloud has a silver lining."

In this statement, the medium was even more significant than the message. The impact of a familiar, time-honored Castilian proverb, uttered in Spanish by the head of the Generalitat, must have helped to assuage, however temporarily, the acrimony between Catalonia and other parts of Spain, most notably Castile and Andalusia. Nonetheless, many Catalans could object to the fact that, while millions were spent during the previous decade on the building of the new Thyssen Museum in Madrid, nothing had been invested to enhance the safety of the Liceu (*La Vanguardia* 4 Feb. 1994). They could also no doubt sympathize with the words of author Francisco Umbral (*La Vanguardia* 3 Feb. 1994) that "The Liceo burns and Catalonia burns silently every day..." Umbral points explicitly to Castilian fears that the Catalan language, openly spoken as it is, will threaten the primacy of Castilian; hence, his further conclusion (*ibid.*) that "When the Liceo burns, language burns."

Since the Liceu represents both Catalonia and its language, its destruction diminishes them both. This is fundamentally why public funding for reconstruction of the building was so much at issue. The very existence of Catalonia seemed to be at stake.



## THE LICEU AND SOCIAL CLASS

We have already seen that historically the Liceu was considered a bastion of the Catalan bourgeoisie. From the start, families representing the upper echelon of Catalan society owned boxes as inheritable property. The anarchist attack on the theater that occurred in 1893 was perhaps the most memorable and tragic embodiment of the class hatred engendered by the very existence of the Liceu. Catalan journalist Javier Tusell sums up the situation by stating (*El Mundo* 1 Feb. 1994) that "The Liceo was a sign of distinction and social hierarchy, at the same time that it was the medium of differentiation from the political capital (Madrid). ...The most important families were the protagonists in the life of the Liceo. This was the moment when the direction of the life of the city was in the hands of a handful of families and the situation continued as such for four generations afterwards. ...Historically, the Liceo has been witness to the strength and weakness of this Catalan bourgeoisie."

The class significance surrounding the Liceo in the nineteenth century carried on well into the twentieth. At the time of the fire, four hundred descendants of upper-class Catalan families were still shareholders in a private corporation which formed the so-called Junta Directiva -Governing Board- of the Liceu. The very existence of this Junta Directiva, which from the start lobbied publicly and negotiated privately to retain its members' privileged status, operated as a constant reminder of the Liceu's elite origins and right-wing history. As Eduardo Mendoza pointed out (*El País* 2 March 1994), "It is an understatement to say that the Liceo was a bastion of Francoism: it was in great part the bourgeoisie which frequented the Liceo who financed the bombs that Franco's forces dropped on Barcelona and the rest of Spain."

When the Liceu burnt to the ground on January 31, 1994, expressions of class conflict once again rose to the surface. Feelings against the bourgeoisie emerged particularly in the debate over financial responsibility for the reconstruction effort. It was argued that those who owned shares, that is, the four hundred members of the Junta Directiva, should rebuild the edifice at their own expense, that the public in general and the State should not be held responsible for what is in essence private property. Class feelings consolidated specifically around three issues: (1) the power and social superiority of Barcelona within Catalonia as a whole, that is, Barcelona's privileged position vis-a-vis the Catalan provinces of Girona, Lleida, and Tarragona; (2) the financial inability of the majority of the Catalans to take advantage of the opera; and (3) the expropriation of residents in buildings immediately adjacent to the Liceu.

A chorus of Catalan voices from outside the city of Barcelona objected to continued public financing of the elitist institution that they considered the Liceu to be. Albert Boadella, writing in *El Punt* (6 Feb. 1994), the principal newspaper in the Catalan provincial capital of Girona, pointed out that the Liceu has been "private property, financed with public money," given the huge governmental subventions the institution had received in recent decades. A main editorial in the same publication (February 3, 1994) warned that if the Liceu was going to be rebuilt from public funds, it should be open "to the entire society and in conditions accessible to everyone." Joan Rivas (*ibid.*) reminded readers that the Municipal Theater of Girona was in dire need of restoration. However, he observed sarcastically with reference, once again, to Montserrat Caballé, that "here (in Girona) we have no crying divas, nor are we in Barcelona"; restoration of the Municipal Theater would therefore be unlikely.

The monetary collection effort mounted on behalf of the Liceu during the month after the fire evoked expressions of resentment from working-class Catalans all over the provinces. These feelings emerged clearly in a rural *calçotada* –or leek party– that I attended in a village about a half hour's drive north of the city of Tarragona. Like most *calçotades*, which occur at this time of year because of the leek (*calçot*) harvest, this one was a large, boisterous affair held in a farmhouse outside of town. Several dozen guests feasted on abundant food (leeks, artichokes, lambchops, sausage, all grilled over an open fire) and drink (*sangría*, vermouth, almond liqueur). Dessert consisted of a rich cake (*brazo de gitano*), brought out on a large cardboard tray. No sooner had we finished dessert and started coffee than the two main cooks, both male farmers, appeared at the head of the table, holding the cardboard tray, which now read, in bold letters: PRO LICEO. Between the two words they had poked a hole in the cardboard, as an indication that whatever money was deposited in the tray would disappear into a bottomless pit. There was a good deal of joking about whether Visa or other credit cards would be accepted. This act was followed by a heated discussion of various ways in which the government uses taxes to rob the ordinary citizen. At the same gathering, a farmer remarked angrily, "Montserrat Caballé cries, but she pays taxes in Andorra." Apparently, when it comes to class rivalries, Catalan solidarity disintegrates. At least among this group of farmers, little sympathy was shown for rebuilding the Liceu through public funds.

The economic exclusivity of the Liceu also proved to be a source of concern within the city of Barcelona itself. Arturo San Agustín summed up the opinions of many citizens when he declared boldly (*El Periódico* 1 Feb. 1994) that "The Liceu, let us not fool ourselves, has



always been *theirs*" (emphasis mine). A reader wrote to *La Vanguardia* that, instead of spending money on an institution like the Liceu, which is economically available to only a few, it should go towards restoration of popular monuments that have fallen into disrepair, like the magic fountain of Montjuïc (a hillside park near central Barcelona), which can be enjoyed by everyone. Ordinary citizens of Barcelona objected that money should be spent on rebuilding an opera house when there were more urgent needs. One reader of *El Periódico* (11 Feb. 1994) made a heartrending, public plea to Pasqual Maragall, mayor of Barcelona, that before allocating funds to the Liceu, the sidewalks on her block should be repaired: "If they are fixed, the elderly, women wheeling baby carriages, handicapped people, and all residents (of the neighborhood) will be grateful, since the current situation requires them to walk in the middle of the street."

Finally, in terms of class conflict, there was the spectre of the expropriation of buildings adjacent to the Liceu. From the moment the Liceu burnt, speculations emerged about arson. For over half a decade, the Liceu had been trying to expand by buying out neighboring buildings. These attempts were unsuccessful. Inevitably, suspicions arose that the Consortium of the Liceu, in desperation for expansion, arranged the fire in order to rebuild on a grander scale. There were apparently inexplicable details supporting such a theory, among them the fatal delay in reporting the fire and the rescue in toto of the Liceu's valuable art objects. In order to clear the rubble, several dozen residents of the area were immediately and forcibly relocated to the nearby Hotel Oriente. Newspapers reported that these citizens would surely never return to their homes, their buildings sacrificed to the clean-up effort. Many victims of the fire at first opposed all negotiations that would lead to relocation.

There were public expressions of sympathy for these displaced persons. On February 1, 1994, *El Periódico* published a picture of a desconsolate elderly woman, seated outdoors, with a man bending over her and stroking her head. The caption read: "A municipal policeman consoles Pepita Gómez: At 87 years of age, she was displaced from her house." A week later the same newspaper (8 Feb. 1994) announced that displaced residents had set up tables along the Rambles to collect signatures in support of their cause. By the middle of February, many businesses along the Rambles kept petitions next to their cash registers for customers to sign in favor of the displaced residents and against expansion of the Liceu. In the press and the popular mind, the victims were portrayed as innocent pawns fighting a powerful Leviathan, the Liceu, voraciously destroying everything in its expansionist path. From the Catalan town of La Masó in the comarca of Tarragonès (*Diari de Tarragona* 3 Feb. 1994) emerged a



typical accusation: "I understand that the new bourgeoisie needs a new theater, but I do not understand why a private institution should have to be funded with money from poor citizens. I notice that our supporters are only inclined to be so in electoral years. With the Law in their hands and the pretense of progress, they devote themselves to expropriating homes in the service of the great theater and the great capital....It is sad and shameful that progress has to come at the expense of the humble and poor."

For many Catalan citizens from the provinces and the city alike, the Liceu was an elitist institution, unworthy of any support, much less public support. Like the appeals to ethnic loyalty, those arousing class interests, which are always close to the surface in Catalonia, emerged in the ongoing debate over the future of the destroyed opera house.

### THE LICEU IN CONTEMPORARY SPAIN AND CATALONIA

It was primarily because of concern over financial responsibilities for the future of the Liceu that class, ethnic, and regional concerns arose in public discourse. In the end, the public citizenry of neither Catalonia nor Spain as a whole was held financially responsible. The entire cost of reconstruction—estimated at 9,680 million pesetas (about 77 million dollars at the 1995 exchange rate)—comes from private sources. Royal Insurance, with which the Liceu was contracted, pays about a fifth of this amount; somewhat less than a third of the total comes from the already-allocated operating budget of the theater; and the remainder, a bit less than half the total, originates with 31 private donors, including banks, businesses, insurance and finance companies, and the like. The private donors are destined to constitute the directing body of the Liceu Foundation, which will have economic control over the theater from now on. In exchange for their property rights and in compensation for the insurance that they carry, the 400 people whose families for generations owned private interests in the theater will have the right to select the locales they wish to occupy in the new theater. The new Liceu will be entirely a publicly-owned institution, erected in the same spot as its fallen antecedent and in similar style, but with updated technology and seating. Residents of the adjacent buildings in the end ceded to the demands for expansion because it was made economically advantageous for them to do so (Ysa Figueras).

The catastrophic burning of the Liceu, as we have seen, evoked strong class and ethnic sentiments both within and outside of Barcelona. It is difficult to imagine similarly strong reactions to the destruction of any single theater in, say, the United States. Clearly, the Liceu within Spain is charged with a symbolic value far in excess of

any comparable artistic institution in many countries. Partly, the debate over the Liceu's future reflected intense loyalty to the institution from many different quarters. As one woman from the Catalan bourgeoisie told me, despite vociferous opposition to the Liceu in the press and on the streets, the opera house provided and still provides pleasure to people from outside of Catalonia as well as to those from the laboring classes within Catalonia.

To many of those outside, the Gran Teatre del Liceu is comparable to the Prado Museum in Madrid: a source of national pride even for those who cannot or choose not to take advantage of the institution. And then there are thousands of Catalans, not themselves of the old industrial bourgeoisie, who nevertheless depended for their identity and spiritual sustenance on the opera. Consider one woman who has only a modest income but nevertheless maintained a subscription in the fourth tier of the Liceu. When she heard the opera house was burning, she remarked, in a state of near catatonic shock, *On aniré ara? On aniré ara?*—"Where will I go now?" The Liceu was her principal yearly expense and her sole source of diversion. Another woman pointed out, too, that the social inequality built into the Liceu appealed to at least some of the working classes. Many of them benefitted from vicarious enjoyment of the spectacle, not so much the music as the fashion show. Traditionally, they would gather round outside the theater to observe the elaborate, expensive costumes of the elite, much as they do now via newspapers which provide glossy reports on season openings at the opera. In the opinion of one bourgeois woman, "The Liceu was not necessarily despised by the less privileged. The Liceu was for everyone, there was something in it for you whether you were rich or poor."

In the first months after the fire, when the future was uncertain, public opinion regarding the Liceu was a main source of daily conversation and newsreporting throughout Spain. The Liceu, in Ortner's terms, was a key symbol throughout the country. Within and outside of Catalonia, it obviously represented a good deal more than the musical performances it provided: it was a barometer of class and ethnic solidarity. The debate over its future gave raw exposure to intense rivalries that far transcend the merely local circumstances in which the Liceu's musical program is carried out.

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